

Essential Characteristics of Women: A Philosopher's Approach
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Institute of Psychological Sciences
Seminar on Priestly Formation
August 5, 2009
Lecture I

08/01/09

The history of western philosophy has been plagued by several significant problems circling around the identification of essential characteristics of women (and, I might add, of men as well). Many of the problems directly related to woman's identity flow from more deeply seated philosophical areas of controversy. At the same time, twentieth century personalist philosophy has provided a good foundation for solving some of these problems. What I will attempt to do in these two lectures and discussions is to identify and describe some selected problems, and then to propose solutions for your consideration. The material has been gathered from some of my previously published work, from parts of a third volume of *The Concept of Woman* in progress, and from participation in various other lectures and discussions. Appendices and a few references have been handed out for your use. I will try to limit my presentations to 40 minutes each so that we can have discussions following each one.

Philosophical Problems Identifying Essential Characteristics of Women

If we go way back to five-hundred years before the birth of Christ, we find in Ancient Greek Philosophy already a tendency towards the two fundamentally erroneous ways of approaching essential characteristics of human beings. Plato, who suggested the reincarnation of a sexless soul into male or female bodies (and even lower animals), had Socrates state in Book V of the *Republic*, that the female body (and its biological capacities for reproduction) were not

significant in a woman's identity. He concluded his analysis with what we could call a unisex claim, that there are no essential characteristics of woman that differed from those of a man. Aristotle, on the other hand, selected a few essential characteristics of women which sharply contrasted their identity with that of men. In a clear reductionism, he used these characteristics to explain all sorts of essential aspects of a woman and a man's respective identities. The female was associated with the elements cold and wet; with characteristics of passivity and irrationality; the intellectual virtue of true opinion, and the moral virtue of obedience. The male was associated with the elements hot and dry; with characteristics of activity and rationality; with the intellectual virtue of wisdom, and moral virtue of ruling.

Thus, on the one hand, in Plato essential characteristics of women were totally rejected; and on the other hand, in Aristotle essential characteristics of women were clearly identified and applied to all aspects of her life. Even though both of these approaches to essential elements were wrong, they none-the-less framed the discussion about women's identity for over two-thousand years. We see them reappearing over the centuries in different forms, but always with the same general approach.

The rejection of essential characteristics of women *per se* reappeared after Descartes' dualism which proposed that man is a sexless mind ("I am therefore nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding or reason..."¹) completely separate from its embodiment in a particular body. Descartes' views were especially integrated into the Protestant Reformation, which often promoted new kinds of unisex theories. More recently we find new forms of unisex approaches in post-modernism fueled by Nietzsche and various kinds of Post-

¹ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, "Meditation Two," (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), #29, p. 19.

Enlightenment feminisms. The rejection of essential characteristics of women, gender, and even human identity continues the spreading of its wasteland to the present.

In contrast to this unisex approach, reductionism with respect to women's essential characteristics also keeps reappearing. Many are biologically based; including the more crass examples of Freud or Sartre, who identify woman with penis envy or 'the hole' respectively, or what Betty Friedan identified as housework filling the time through 'the feminine mystique'. Some reductionist views are epistemologically based, such as the very familiar association of women with intuition, being focused **only** on the present, the emotions, etc. Satirists always work their 'so called' humor using exaggerated stereotypes, which may have an element of truth in them, but can not really be defended philosophically. Even the more entertaining claims about women being from Venus and men from Mars or women's brains having everything interconnected and men's brains with separate compartments in which one simply does nothing, do not explain how certain generalities may or may not be the case.

Throughout this history of false alternatives (two equally erroneously approaches to women's identity), since the advent of Christianity, a third approach, which I call, "The Catholic Inspiration for Integral Gender Complementarity" kept reappearing. Beginning with the example of Jesus Christ himself, then partially articulated by St. Augustine, a third approach to essential characteristics of women emerged, namely, that women are equal in dignity to men (*qua* shared essential human characteristics) in many respects at the same time as they are significantly different in some other respects. The challenge is to articulate **exactly what other respects significantly differentiate women from men**. Just to list a few who have offered reasoned arguments for these other respects the following authors come to mind: Hildegard of Bingen,

Christine de Pisan, Emmanuel Mounier, Gabrielle Marcel, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Gertrude von Le Fort, St. Edith Stein, Bernard Lonergan, Alice von Hildebrand, and Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II).

In this lecture I will look at a set of specific “problems” or “mysteries” that accompany this dramatic history of woman’s identity: the problem of passivity and activity; the problem of temperaments and free will choice; and the problem of masculinity and femininity. These three problems can be situated hierarchically in their approach to the human being on the levels of physics, bio-chemistry, and psychology. Above all, essential characteristics of women are embedded in the essential characteristics of her identity as one of the two ways of being a human person. Thus, part of our analysis will summarize some of these essentially shared human characteristics at the same time as we seek to identify individuated characteristics of women. Various appendices accompanying these reflections may be useful to you in following my approach to the question of essential characteristics of women.

The problem of passivity (the female) and activity (the male)

Anyone familiar with Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals* will recall his claim “Now of course the female, *qua* female, is passive, and the male, *qua* male, is active—it is whence the principle of movement comes.”² The Ancient Greek philosopher added quickly that he had, in this statement taken “the widest formulation of each of these two opposites, viz., regarding the male *qua* active and causing movement, and the female *qua* passive and being set in

² Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 729b15. See Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution (750BC-1250AD)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 92-93. Hereafter COW I.

movement...”³ In this passage, he also drew an analogy of the female with non-living material things like wood or wax, and an analogy with the male and the carpenter who made the bed and the form impressed into the wax. The association of the female with passivity and male with activity made its way through western thought both in academic settings as well as in popular satires.

The association of women with passivity did not only occur with Aristotelian philosophers, scholastic developments, and Renaissance satires, such as *Le Roman de la rose*; it was also a target of critique by twentieth-century French philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir understood woman to be passively defined by ‘the other’ or men, and recommended, following Jean Paul Sartre, for women to overturn the tables and begin defining the other as well as the self.

Emmanuel Mounier, one of the founders of French Personalism expressed in “Woman is also a person,” his dismay that women passively allowed the culture to keep them in a state well beneath their personal call. “[Women] are installed in a life of submission, and it is not the kind of submission which is the crowning triumph of a personal life, the giving of self by a free being, but a submission that is beneath the dignity of the person and is but an anticipated renunciation of one’s spiritual vocation.”⁴ Mounier repeats a call of every person to “exercise a maximum of initiative, responsibility, and spiritual life.”⁵ He clearly suggests that passivity is not a perfection of the person and argues: “The person on the contrary is characterized by self-possession and

³ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 729b16-18.

⁴ Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1950), 128-29.

⁵ Mounier, *Personalism*, 67.

self-determination, by generosity.”⁶ Consider the following short passage from Mounier’s *A Personalist Manifesto*, which reveals his emphasis on the relation of act to a person: “The life of the person does not consist in isolation or escape or alienation; it is presence and engagement in action. The person is not a place of interior retreat for mystics, a circumscribed domain into which my activity must lead from outside. It is an active presence within the total makeup of man, and all his activity is concerned with it.”⁷

Emmanuel Mounier’s way of characterizing the human person through the three characteristics of self-possession, self-determination, and generosity found a deep echo in Karol Wojtyla’s restatement of the order and expression as: self-determination, self-possession, and self-gift. In an article, entitled “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” Wojtyla summarized succinctly the more elaborate analysis of these three characteristics in his other works. First, he associates self-determination with act:

The experience of human action refers to the lived experience of the fact I act.”... The lived experience of the fact “I act” differs from all facts that merely “happen” in a personal subject. This clear difference between something that “happens” in the subject and an “activity” or action of the subject allows us, in turn, to identify an element in the comprehensive experience of the human being that decisively distinguishes the activity or action of a person from all that merely happens in the person. I define this element as *self-determination*.⁸

Next, Wojtyla directly connects the will with self-determination, in a personalistic way:

When I say that the will is the power of self-determination, I do not have in mind the will all alone... Rather, **I necessarily have in mind here the whole person.** Self-

⁶ Mounier, *Personalism*, 70.

⁷ Mounier, *Personalism*, 73.

⁸ Karol Wojtyla, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” in *Person and Community* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 189. See also, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” in *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), Part II, chapter 3: 105-148.

determination takes place through acts of will, through this central power of the human soul. And yet self-determination is a property of the person, who, as the familiar definition says, is a *naturae rationalis individua substantia*. This property is realized through the will, which is an accident [does not subsist on its own, but subsists in a substance]. Self-determination—or, in other words, freedom—is not limited to the accidental dimension, belongs to the substantial dimension of the person: it is the **person's** freedom, and not just the will's freedom, although it is undeniably the person's freedom through the will.⁹

What this means is that properly speaking, it is not the will that is free, but rather the person who is free in the exercise of his or her will.

Wojtyla explains that through repeated acts of will, a person not only determines something outside of the self, but in an act the person simultaneously determines the self as well: “The concept of self-determination involves more than just the concept of efficacy: I am not only the efficient cause of my acts, but through them I am also in some sense the ‘creator of myself’”¹⁰ This unfolding the meaning of self-determination reveals that a person who determines the self, also possesses the self that is determined, and governs the self. In his words: “If I determine myself, I must possess myself and govern myself. These realities mutually explain one another because they also mutually imply one another.”

Finally, Wojtyla draws out a structure of generosity as self-gift; and he refers back to *Gaudium et spes* #24 (“The human being, who is the only creature on earth that God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself or herself except through a disinterested gift of himself or herself.”) He argues that “the ontology of the person suggested by this text” requires that “we

⁹ Wojtyla, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 190. Bold my emphasis.

¹⁰ Wojtyla, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 191.

must once again look to the personal structure of self-determination.”¹¹ Wojtyla draws out his analysis with a list of hypothetical syllogisms:

Only if one possesses oneself can one give oneself and do this in a disinterested way.

Only if one governs oneself can one make a gift of oneself, and this again a disinterested gift.

Only if one can determine oneself...can one also become a gift for others.

[Only if] one becomes a gift for others does one most fully become oneself.

This “law of the gift,” if it may be so designated, is inscribed deep within the dynamic structure of the person. ... This relational portrait of the person, however, necessarily presupposes the immanent (and indirectly “substantial”) portrait that unfolds before us from an analysis of the personal structure of self-determination.¹²

In passivity, a person simply goes along allowing something to happen to the self or within the self. Karol Wojtyla vividly describes some detrimental effects of passivity in a person in relation with others:

The term “conformism” derives from “to conform” and denotes a tendency to comply with the accepted custom and to resemble others... [W]hen it begins to sway toward servility, it becomes highly negative.... Thus conformism consists primarily in an attitude of compliance or resignation, in a **specific form of passivity** that makes the man-person to be but the subject of *what happens* instead of being the *actor* or *agent* responsible for building his own attitudes and his own commitment in the community.¹³

Wojtyla says that passivity *per se* is neutral, and that it can be a constructive or creative way to assimilate into a particular community of choice. But when passivity is a non-involvement, it indicates a superficial or surface attitude that evades opposition, and “is, in a sense, devoid of personal grounds of conviction, decision, and choice.”¹⁴

¹¹ Wojtyla, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 193-94.

¹² Wojtyla, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 194.

¹³ Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 289.

¹⁴ Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 289.

A solution to the problem of the association of passivity with the female and activity with the male can be found by a careful understanding of the meaning of receptivity. A clear understanding of the hierarchical levels of being is needed, with respect to passivity, receptivity, and activity and their respective relations to spirit and matter. While the only being which is pure actuality has no matter in its Divine nature; human beings are admixtures of form and matter, actuality and potentiality, activity and passivity. Within the range of human operations, passivity has a lower level than receptivity. Passivity implies a lack of intentional act, a lack of engagement of intellect and will, a basic undergoing of activation from outside, or a letting happen of something happening within. Receptivity, however, is an act of making room for another being, natural, human, or spiritual.

In metaphysics, the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic hierarchical ordering goes from act, down to receptivity, down to passivity; or vice versa, from being passive, up to being receptive, up to the One Divine Being who is wholly active in His nature. Norris Clarke, S.J. summarizes it this way: “In the lower levels of being, indeed, receptivity is woven in with poverty, incompleteness, and the process of change from potentiality to actuality. As we move higher in the scale of being, however, specifically into the personal, it turns more and more into an active, welcoming gratefully responsive attitude, which is a positive, joy-bringing aspect of personal relations.”¹⁵

Gabriel Marcel has beautifully described the qualities of receptivity as being “available” for another: “maintaining ourselves actively in a permeable state” and grounded in the realm of

¹⁵ W. Norris Clarke, S.J. , *Person and Being*, (Marquette: University Press, 20-21.)

total spiritual availability.”¹⁶ He claims that this characteristic is essential for anyone to be a person, rather than simply being one individual among others. The category of “receptivity” is an essential middle category between active and passive, which, as Aristotle stated so long ago, “the widest formulation of each of these two opposites, viz., regarding the male *qua* active and causing movement, and the female *qua* passive and being set in movement...”¹⁷

Can we say that receptivity is more an essential characteristic of woman than of men?

Gertrude von le Fort, in *The Eternal Woman: The Woman in Time/Timeless Woman* makes such an argument. She carefully elaborates how receptivity is a willed act, seen in its perfection in Mary. “Whenever surrender is, there also is a flash from the mystery of the Eternal Woman.” It is the “Let it be done to me” of Our Lady.¹⁸ Alice von Hildebrand also develops the connection between receptivity and women in *The Privilege of Being a Woman*:

Another great gift that God has granted the female nature is the gift of receptivity. This is not to be confused with passivity as Aristotle does when he claims that the male is superior to the female because he is “active,” whereas she is passive. Clearly passivity is inferior to activity, for one is only being “acted upon.” But this is not true of receptivity which involves an alert, awakened, joyful readiness to be fecundated by another person or by a beautiful object. All created persons are essentially receptive because “there is nothing that we have not received.” (1 Cor. 4:7) Women feel at home in this receptivity and move in it with ease and grace. This is already inscribed in their biological nature: a wife giving herself to her husband accepts joyfully to be fecundated, to receive. Her receptivity is a self-giving.¹⁹

¹⁶ Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1956), 38 and 39. See also, Gabriel Marcel, “Phenomenological Notes,” in *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 91-92.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 729b15.

¹⁸ Gertrud von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman: The Woman in Time/Timeless Woman* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1954), 10 and 59-62.

¹⁹ Alice von Hildebrand, *The Privilege of Being a Woman* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Sapientia Press, 2005), 62-63. See also 65 and 89.

Now clearly men can be very receptive too. So what needs to be understood is why and how women seem more disposed to receptivity, and whether this can be thought of as essentially different from the root of men's receptivity. I will return to this question in the discussion of masculinity and femininity and the psyche.

The problem of temperaments and free will choice

In Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, philosophers of natural science began to study the importance of the elements (earth, air, fire, and water/ and cold, hot, wet, dry) in disease patterns and in human health, including generation. Hippocrates (c. 460-377 BC) and Galen (131-201 AD) are two examples. The Islamic philosopher Avicenna (980-1037), who also wrote about medicine; and he further considered the role of elements and humors in health and diseases.

The Benedictine Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a nurse with a medical focus, was the first Catholic author to elaborate a carefully developed theory of four different types of women and four different types of men, depending on a person's relation to the elements and humors (the quality of blood, phlegm, and yellow and black bile).²⁰ In spite of the appearance of biological determinism that her analysis of elements, humours, and types sometimes seems to suggest, Hildegard defends the claim that a man or woman has free will to act in relation to the humours in her body. She states directly that "reason comes into flower" in relation to bodily organs, so "we can gather up our free will and all our discipline so that we can master the attacks

²⁰ See a summary of Hildegard of Bingen's theory in Sr. Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, rpt, Montreal: Eden Press, 1985), 303-309.

of the other humours and complete our action in a disciplined way.”²¹ The introduction of free will shifts the focus of analysis away from the natural sciences to a higher level of organization within the human being, to the level in which consciousness and the psyche play a fundamental part.²²

Hildegard of Bingen, obviously, did not have the benefit of modern scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, she approached gender identity through the levels analysis similar to those found today in physics, chemistry, and biology.²³ Working within the limits of a medieval conception of science, she asked whether sexual differentiation could be found at the most elementary level of organization.²⁴ Accepting a theory of four fundamental elements, previously identified by the Greek philosopher Empedocles, she asked how these elements might relate to the respective identities of woman and man. Her question is significant, because within traditional medieval cosmology, derived from the Aristotelian tradition, the hierarchy of elements, or fire, air, water, and earth, had been interpreted in such a way that the male emerged as the privileged type. In

²¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Divine Works*, 71.

²² This section is extracted and revised from “Sex and Gender Differentiation in Hildegard of Bingen and Edith Stein,” in *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Vol. XX, no. 2, (Summer, 1993), 389-414.

²³ It is possible to hierarchically differentiate three natural sciences along the following lines: Physics searches for the most elementary (sub-atomic) particles in the universe; Chemistry studies the properties and reactions of atoms and compounds; and Biology studies the properties of living organisms.

²⁴ Hildegard explored scientific areas outside of questions of sex differentiation as well. Her work on stones, astronomy, herbs, and on the healing arts testifies to her interest in an empirical approach to the world. See, *Liber Simplicis Medicinae*, known also as *Physica*, and chapter iv translated into German as *Das Buch von den Steinen* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1979; *Liber Compositae Medicinae* known also as *Causa et Curae* and translated into German as *Heilkunde: das Buch von dem Grund und Wesen der Heilung der Krankheiten* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1957), especially chapter iii (about the Four elements, Fire, Air, Water, and Earth); and *Liber Divinorum Operum*, known also as *De Operatione Dei* and translated into English as *Book of Divine Works* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1987). The original Latin works are found in J. B. Pitra, ed. *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis* (1882), vol. 8; and J.P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, (1841-1864), vol. 197. Scholz states that Hildegard “devoted the years from 1150-1157 to the study of nature, 364.

Aristotle's view the two highest elements, fire and air, are found in greater amounts in the male, and the two lowest elements were greater in the female. Hildegard introduces a balance into the distribution of the elements. According to her, the highest and lowest elements (fire and earth) are found in greater quantities in the male, while the two middle elements (air and water) are present in the female.²⁵ So the gender differentiation comes from the proportionality of the various elements in a man or in a woman.

The evidence that Hildegard introduces to support her claims is usually "mixed" because it combines axiological and empirical information where today such information would be distinguished. For example, Hildegard offers a theological rationale for the relations of the elements to gender, namely the creation of Adam from the earth, and Eve from the flesh. At the same time she associates, as a result of her empirical observations, the primary sexual characteristic of childbearing with air, and secondary sexual characteristics (a male's beard, for example), with earth and fire.²⁶ Hildegard also claims that the '**female element air**' tempers the **male character** and leads it to self control. Consequently, an ideal man would have a strong amount of this female element to temper the predominance of fire in his nature.²⁷

If Chemistry is the science that considers a higher level of organization composed of fundamental particles identified by Physics, then Hildegard describes the 'chemistry' of sex and gender when she analyzes the function of the four humours (phlegm, blood, choler, and black

²⁵ Today scientists would claim that elementary sub-atomic or atomic particles have no sex differentiated aspects either in isolation or in relation to one another.

²⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, *Heilkunde* (Causae et curae) Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1957), 124, 93. Translated by Jasmin el Kordi Schmidt as are all subsequent passages from this text.

²⁷ Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, 139-40.

bile) which were composed of the elements previously identified.²⁸ These four humours led to the differentiation of temperaments into the phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric, and melancholic respectively. Hildegard raises interesting questions about sex differentiation when she wonders how the balance of the different humours affects men and women. She claims that women have **more humours, and in particular, more of the humour blood, than do men.**²⁹ Thus, it would seem as though, in her view, women would be more directly associated with what is known today as the sanguine temperament. This preponderance of blood in women occurs in part because females have a greater balance of the element water.

More interesting, perhaps, is Hildegard's question about the relation of humours to character. Just as contemporary scientists might ask questions about the effect of different hormones (testosterone or estrogens, for example) or blood conditions (lack of iron, for example) on human behaviour, Hildegard analogously considers how bodily 'chemicals,' or the four humours within a particular type of woman or man, might relate to such characteristic themes as aggression, depression, skin tone, and sense of well being.³⁰

Hildegard also asks how different kinds of blood in men might be related to the character of children produced through their seed. Anticipating, perhaps, questions of genetic disposition towards certain diseases or behaviour patterns, Hildegard answers these questions through the limited concepts of medieval science.

²⁸ Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, 125. An imbalance or excess of one of the humours could lead to illness or death. See also Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179: A Visionary Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 96-102.

²⁹ Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, 143.

³⁰ Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, 139-145.

Hildegard also explores how menopause affects different kinds of women. Her questions probe not only biological disease patterns but also mental illnesses. In addition, she wonders how physical, chemical, and biological aspects of a woman's identity influence behaviour and character. In these kinds of questions she considers issues that move into ranges associated in contemporary science with physiology. Hildegard questions the variety of ways in which men and women interact with one another, and consider how these interpersonal dynamics relate to physical, chemical, and biological aspects of human identity.³¹ In addition to her differentiation of males from females, Hildegard also asks whether or not there were general kinds of structures of men and of women that could be developed as a theory of types.

To repeat our initial claim about Hildegard, even though it is true that she considered the place of humours in her study of the character of men and women, Hildegard **never** suggested that people could be divided into the four types of humours, in such a way as to suggest they were not free. **Each man and woman had portions of all the humours**, but it was the preponderant balance of some that influenced their character. In her words: “[W]e can gather up our free will and all our discipline so that we can master the attacks of the other humours and complete our action in a disciplined way.”³² And ““In the humours there blooms also the gift of reason so that human beings know what they have to do and must not do... In this way we human

³¹ Hildegard, *Heilkunde*, 138-150.

³² Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works* (Sante Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Company 1987), 71.

beings preserve our sense of reverence and discipline by restraining the impulse of the other humours and bringing our actions under control,"³³

Some problems with discussions about the humours and temperaments today were identified well by Karol Wojtyla in *The Acting Person*. One problem concerns to what extent our bodily type causes us to behave in definitive ways. By bodily type is understood both our soma and its effect in our psyche. Karol Wojtyla summarizes this problem this way:

Mobility is externally manifested and even from observing it we may infer certain differences between people. These differences have from ancient times inspired anthropologists with the idea of constitutive resemblances, of certain, somatically distinguishable, human types. Moreover, in relation to what was said previously about the human psyche being conditioned by the soma, these resemblances and human types also apply to the psyche. *Hence the whole problem of temperaments*, which has persisted throughout the history of anthropology from Aristotle to our days.³⁴

One aspect of this problem is the result of a circular methodology: if we observe a large number of people, and in so doing divide them into four general types, then it becomes circular to make the types categorical rather than the simple generalizations they were. An example of a categorical representation of a person's temperament can be found in the following passage from a recent book: *The Temperament God Gave You*.

We are **each born** with a basic temperament, which is *the sum of our natural preferences*; it shapes our thoughts, ideas, impressions, and the way we tend to react to our environment and to other people. It is our predisposition to react in certain ways, **hard-wired in us**. It is not learned or acquired through contact with our environment. It is not a product of childhood trauma or repressed memories. In a word, it is "nature," as distinguished from "nurture."³⁵

³³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Divine Works*, 60.

³⁴ Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 204, referring back to E. Kretschmer, *Körperbau und Charakter: Untersuchungen zum Konstitutionsproblem und zur Lehre von den Temperamenten*, 24th ed. (Berlin: Springer, 1961). My italics.

³⁵ Art and Laraine Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave You* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2005), 5. Italics the authors' emphasis; bold my emphasis.

While there is no doubt that we are born with basic dispositions, it is a further step to claim that these are predispositions which are hard-wired in us, or given to us by God.

In this light we need to take a closer look at the book *The Temperament God Gave you*, authored by Art and Lorraine Bennett. They describe the temperaments within the four classical categories: “choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic... as but one aspect of an individual’s total personality—the aspect related to behavior and reaction.”³⁶ The Bennett’s qualification that the personality is larger still leaves the difficulty of their identification of temperament as the aspect of the personality related to behavior and reaction. This would seem to rule out the range of free will choice, because they imply that God hard wired us into a particular way of reacting and behaving. Behavior and reactions are often the result of habits, or repeated acts of the same kind. These are not hard-wired at birth, but develop over time, as we cooperate with or act against our various fundamental passions while aiming for some higher ends.

Consider how Thomas Aquinas is described by Art and Laraine Bennett: “St. Thomas Aquinas is thought to have been a brilliant phlegmatic. Neither excitable nor loquacious, like the sanguine and choleric temperaments, he was careful in speech and thought and temperament served him well as a philosopher... On the other hand, because of their cooperative spirit and their fear of conflict, they might be tempted to compromise their principles and go along with the

³⁶ Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave You*, 5-6.

status quo. Plegmatics have a tendency to laziness...”³⁷ Their consistent combinations of generalization and reductionism are a serious difficulty in their book.

While the Bennetts say directly that free will determines a person’s relation to his or her temperament,³⁸ after they begin their analysis, the language they use conveys something very different. They begin by suggesting that a temperament is one of the adjectives characterizing a predominant way of responding or reacting: “Each of us is uniquely and predominantly *one* of the temperaments: *Choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic, or sanguine*.”³⁹ However, before long, in their analysis a particular temperament becomes used as a noun in place of the ontological person, man, or woman. In their shift to noun-usage for a temperament, the general description has now become a statement of identity of the person, rather than an indication of how a person, through exercise of his or her intellect and will, relates to a generalized habitual response. Some examples will demonstrate this point.

Choleric:

“Cholerics and sanquines feel quite comfortable in front of people at parties, although the choleric may require more ‘alone time’ than the ‘sanquine’”. (Bennett, 22)

“The choleric tends to be outspoken and headstrong, argumentative and questioning. The melancholic will not be quick to speak his mind, but will make critical judgments internally.” (Bennett, 25)

“Cholerics are eminently rational; they expect to hear good reasons for any argument.” (Bennett, 30)

“The choleric may fear intimacy in personal relationships; he is too independent, impatient, and insensitive. He can be rash and imprudent when making decisions, and then deny that he has made an error.” (Bennett, 32)

³⁷ Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave you*, 245.

³⁸ Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave You*, 7.

³⁹ Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave You*, 10.

Phlegmatic:

“Phlegmatics are reserved, prudent, sensible, reflective, respectful, and dependable. They are not easily insulted or provoked to anger, nor are they given to exuberance or exaggeration in speech. They are loyal and committed, tolerant and supportive.”

(Bennett, 40)

“Because of their reserved natures, phlegmatics are sometimes accused of being unassertive, or of lacking enthusiasm and spontaneity. Since they aim to please, and want to avoid conflict at all costs, they may become overly conciliatory. Sometimes they are so conciliatory that it appears they do not even know what their own desires are! (Bennett, 41)

Melancholic:

“The melancholic’s reflective nature, combined with his goal of reaching perfection, will cause him to note all the difficulties of a new venture, or a proposed project, worry about all the possible negative outcomes, and pinpoint errors and injustices. The effect can paralyze the melancholic.” (Bennett, 34)

“Melancholics risk becoming easily disappointed when their spouse does not ‘live up’ to their high expectations. Since the fall of Adam, the melancholic has been doomed to disappointment. “(Bennett, 60).

Sanguine:

“A strength of the sanguine is his ability to ‘live in the present moment’; because he does not dwell on the past, nor spend time worrying about the future, he has a very optimistic, joyful attitude toward life.”“ (Bennett, 37)

“Sanguines’ eagerness to please is, however, sometimes at odds with their love of the limelight. Our sanguine son has received quite a few detentions (he believes) for his attention-getting antics in the classroom. Sanguines love to be the center of attention, and they prefer quantity (not necessarily quality) of friendships.” (Bennett, 27-28).

Edith Stein considered how typology fits into a psychology of the individual.

First, every description of an individual must also deal with the concept of his type because the individual as such cannot be understood abstractly. Secondly, definite types are brought into relief by the evidence under study; the structural context is neither simply universal (the same with all beings, without any differentiation), nor is it simply individual (singular to each one, without being common to all.) Third, the types are of practical importance for the methods used in education and medicine;

hence the feminine type or a diversity of feminine types is respectively encountered here.⁴⁰

The types that Edith Stein is referring to include divisions by age, class, and abilities such as the ‘artist’, the intellectual, the valiant woman, the erotic woman, the mother, the young girl, and so on. A woman can change from one type to another. In addition to stating why she thinks a typology can be useful in areas of gender study, she also warns against its abuse, noting a “danger of taking the types as it finds them in each case to be something inflexible and permanent.”⁴¹ It is precisely this danger that we run into when examining some contemporary studies about temperaments.

How is it that the rather flexible approach to the humours and temperaments that were found in Hildegard and St. Edith Stein, became so tightly defined and characterized in the work of Laraine and Art Bennett? They suggest that the Catholic tradition supports the study of the human person from the perspective of temperaments as they have delineated them. In their words: “In the Catholic tradition, temperament is defined as the pattern of inclinations and reactions that proceed from the **psychological** constitution of an individual.”⁴² This sentence is then given a footnote reference to two classical authors of Catholic spirituality: Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life*, and Jordan Aumann, *O.P Spiritual Theology*.⁴³

⁴⁰ Edith Stein, “Problems of Women’s Education,” *Essays on Women* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 166.

⁴¹ Stein, “Problems,” 166. See also, 176. Presumably the same positive and negative aspects of a theory of types would be found in contemporary psychological theory such as in Freudian, Jungian, or Transactional analysis.

⁴² Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave You*, 6. Bold my emphasis

⁴³ Bennett, *The Temperament God Gave You*, 6 note 3. The reference is back to Aumann, page 140 and to Tanquerey, page 8 of the appendix.

When we followed up the reference to Father Tanquerey (1923) we discover the surprising fact he not only does **not promote a discussion of temperaments**, but he goes further to **actually reject the importance of temperaments**. Father Tanquerey specifically locates the root of the temperaments in the **physiological constitution** rather than the **psychological dispositions**, in contradiction to the Bennett's assertions. In Tanquerey's own words:

Frequently the two terms, temperament and character, are taken as synonymous. The distinction between them lies in this, that the former [i.e., temperament] is the sum-total of those fundamental tendencies which flow from the *physiological* constitution of individuals, and the latter [i.e., character] the sum-total of the psychological dispositions, based on temperament as modified by education and will-power, and make lasting by habit.

It will therefore **prove more profitable to study characters than temperaments**, for the important thing from the spiritual point of view is not so much physical temperament as the character of the soul.⁴⁴

Consequently, it is difficult to see how the Bennetts could use Tanquerey as a defense for their claim that the study of the temperaments, as they define them, is in the Catholic tradition.

When we follow up the second source for the Bennett's claim of the Catholic foundations for their approach to the temperaments, or Jordan Aumann, the situation is slightly more complicated. Chapter seven of Father Aumann's *Spiritual Theology* (1980) includes a discussion of the temperaments.⁴⁵ Generally, Rev. Jordan Aumann is more careful to keep the temperaments in their adjectival form; however, he does insert such statements as:

"The inconstancy of sanguine persons is the result of the short duration of their impressions and reactions. They may pass quickly from joy to sorrow... As a rule they abandon any effort that is of long duration," (Aumann, 141)

⁴⁴ The Very Reverend Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1923, appendix page 8.

⁴⁵ Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980).

“Those who are in charge of educating or training the melancholic temperament should keep in mind their strong tendency to concentrate excessively on themselves.” (Aumann 143)

“The phlegmatic is rarely aroused emotionally and, if so, only weakly. The impressions received usually last for only a short time and leave no trace.” (Aumann, 145)

Therefore, it may be that the Bennetts were misled by the example of Jordan Aumann into thinking that their development of discussions about the temperaments and personality types, was solidly grounded in the Catholic tradition.

Aumann begins his chapter by referring to the work of Gordon W. Allport, (1897-1967) *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (1961).⁴⁶ Pursuing this connection, we discover that Allport was firmly rooted in a Protestant (Scottish Presbyterian) approach to the study of religion as a social science. Allport attended the Protestant/ secular Harvard University (1915-1922) and taught there (1922-1925 and 1930-1967).⁴⁷ William James (1842-1910) preceded Allport in the psychology department at Harvard (1875-1907), and firmly established psychology of religion as a social science, in a new approach characterized as pragmatism and secular humanism. Consequently, Allport’s work was identified with the pragmatism of the Harvard and Chicago schools, and it can not be considered as in the Catholic tradition.

When Jordan Aumann includes four pages of description of the four temperaments in *Spiritual Theology*, he actually inserts this topic into his approach to a discussion of sin and conversion. Because Aumann is a widely respected Catholic author, readers may be prone to think erroneously that he is simply describing something that has a long history in Catholic

⁴⁶ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 139.

⁴⁷ Gordon W. Allport in *Wikipedia* [cited 7/18/2009].

thought. Reinforcing this confusion Aumann in his Preface to his work, states that “The Theology contained in this volume is based on the spiritual doctrine of three Doctors of the Church: St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila.”⁴⁸ However, Thomas Aquinas did not delve into the theory of temperaments, preferring rather to emphasize that all human beings have the same eleven fundamental concupiscible passions (love and hate, desire and aversion, and pleasure and pain) and irascible passions (hope and despair, fear and daring, and anger). Therefore, just because Jordan Aumann followed Thomas Aquinas on many things, it does not follow Thomas supports his description of the significance of the temperaments.

Finally, the Bennetts’ way of discussing temperaments in the **noun form** actually posits the psyche as **an independent real entity**, within which a so-called temperament resides. Philosophically speaking, it is **a reification of the psyche**. However, the psyche does not have an independent kind of existence like the body, which remains after death. Instead, *the psyche is an internal mediator between the soma and the higher faculties of the soul, the intellect and will*. As Karol Wojtyla points out in *The Acting Person*, “Man’s entire psychological functioning is the basis of the integration of the person in the action: it does not, however, exteriorize itself in the same way as does somatic functioning. There is no such thing as the “psychical constitution” of man, at any rate not in a sense comparable to his somatic constitution.”⁴⁹ In Wojtyla’s analysis, the psyche is not simply reactive to a somatic movement, but also, often at the same time, a conscious response to values such as truth, goodness, beauty. In Wojtyla’s words:

⁴⁸ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 11.

⁴⁹ Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 222.

The integration of the person in the action indicates a very concrete and, each time, a unique and unrepeatable introduction of somatic reactivity and psychical emotivity into the unity of the action—into the unity with the transcendence of the person expressed by efficacious self-determination that is simultaneously a conscious response to values.⁵⁰

In *The Acting Person* Wojtyla refers back to St. Thomas Aquinas' analysis of the passions into concupiscible and irascible categories: "It rests on an axiological rather than psychological basis inasmuch as the difference between the concupiscent and the irascible appetites lies primarily in the differences between the types of objective, that is, their end, in the value accessible to sense; in the former case this is but an object of desire and in the latter an objective to be attained only by overcoming obstacles or opposition."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 225.

⁵¹ Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 235.